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U.S. task force to fight deer malady

Some state leaders say funding to combat chronic wasting disease is lacking

 By MEG JONES and LEE BERGQUIST
 of the Journal Sentinel staff

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To stem the growing problem of chronic wasting disease, the U.S. government announced a plan Wednesday that would pump federal dollars to states for testing and develop a national database to track the deadly illness.

While Wisconsin's congressional delegation praised the effort to create a national task force, some said the plan doesn't do enough to combat the disease, which shocked authorities in February when it was discovered in Wisconsin's wild white-tailed deer herd.

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U.S. Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.), whose district includes the Mount Horeb area where 18 deer have tested positive for chronic wasting disease, called the federal plan a "modest first step" but said it ignored the immediacy of the crisis.

"There is no encouraging news about the development of a field test," Baldwin said. "There is no encouraging news about the need to address the food safety questions that hunters' families need answered."

Rep. Dave Obey (D-Wis.) wondered why the federal chronic wasting disease plan doesn't mention funding.

"The agencies' report lays out an action plan to deal with the chronic wasting disease but fails to tell us how much money it is going to take to implement it," Obey said.

The plan, released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, assigns the chronic wasting disease problem to four agencies that will coordinate efforts to figure out how the disease spreads and how to stop it. The task force will oversee development of better tests, including live animal testing, and establish a



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standard to accredit more labs.

The task force also will come up with methods for the safe disposal of carcasses - which has become a thorny issue in Wisconsin now that Dane County no longer wants to accept deer carcasses at its landfill.

"This certainly should help," said Julie Langenberg, a veterinarian with the state Department of Natural Resources, who said that Wisconsin officials offered input on the plan.

The plan defines the federal government's role in combating the disease, which has afflicted elk and deer in several states, and specifies how federal agencies will work with states such as Wisconsin.

Noting that the national plan was pulled together in only a few months, Langenberg said funding could be a problem.

"Our major concern is that the national plan is of very limited worth unless it is connected to the federal dollars the Senate and the House are working on," Langenberg said.

Federal money will be essential in Wisconsin for attacking issues such as carcass disposal, said Tom Hauge, the DNR's point man on chronic wasting disease.

"I am afraid that we will not get the funds until this fall, and we have got to sign a (disposal) contract long before then," Hauge said.

Wisconsin officials recently learned that \$3.5 million that the U.S. Department of Agriculture was sending to Wisconsin to fight the disease instead will be used mostly to fight bioterrorism.

In the months since chronic wasting disease was discovered in Wisconsin, the DNR has announced a plan to cull all the deer in an eradication zone where diseased animals were found and thin about half the herd in a surrounding 10-county area. But while the disease has so far been found only in a small area in south central Wisconsin, hunters in other parts of the state worry about the safety of their venison.

The DNR said Tuesday that it will have the capacity to test more than 30,000 deer for chronic wasting disease outside the area that's been targeted for major deer reductions.

The testing will be done at a state laboratory in Madison and at other labs the federal government plans to open up for chronic wasting disease tests, DNR Secretary Darrell Bazzell told members of the Natural Resources Board.

The increased testing should give hunters some comfort about the safety of venison, Bazzell said.

However, state officials said they still are awaiting word on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's position on certifying private labs in Wisconsin and other states that could test hundreds of thousands of deer.

The World Health Organization has said there is no scientific evidence that chronic wasting disease in deer can infect humans. But the agency also says no

part of a deer or elk with evidence of the disease should be eaten.

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